DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 525 EC 160 048

AUTHOR Mossenson, David
TITLE Legitimizing Provision for Gifted Children: An Australian Perspective. Discussion Paper No. 12.
INSTITUTION Western Australia Education Dept., Perth.
PUB DATE Oct 81
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the World Congress on Gifted and Talented Children (4th, Montreal, Canada, August 1981).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; Educational Methods; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Foreign Countries; *Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Australia

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the history and considers future aspects of providing education to intellectually gifted children in Australia. The period of 1960-1975 is seen as one of limited interest in gifted education, while the years 1976-80 are classified as times of greater experimentation on a state by state basis. The third and current phase is considered in terms of its political and economic context. Conditions indicating the legitimation of special provisions for gifted students are listed (including implementation through all levels of schooling and open evaluation as a routine part of practice). Among change strategies cited are efforts to relax rigid school structures and joint advocacy with proponents of the disadvantaged, the less able, and other groups. Implications for federal and state education policy are addressed. (CL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED233525

LEGITIMIZING PROVISION FOR GIFTED CHILDEN: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

DISCUSSION PAPER
No. 12

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P. Hill

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

C160048

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

DISCUSSION PAPER NO. 12

LEGITIMIZING PROVISION FOR GIFTED CHILDREN: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

A paper presented at the Fourth World Congress on Gifted and Talented Children, Montreal, Canada, August 1981.

David Mossenson

Education Department of Western Australia

October, 1981

OTHER TITLES IN THIS SERIES

No. 1 Schools and Work

No. 2 Estimated Demand for Additional Primary and Secondary Teachers for Government Schools, 1979-1980

No. 3 A Survey of Parental Involvement in Government Secondary Schools

No. 4 Subschools

No. 5 The Heterogeneous Class in Secondary English

No. 6 The Advisory Teacher Service in Western Australia

No. 7 Testing and Assessment

No. 8 Preparing Young People for the Workforce: The Place of Literacy and Numeracy

No. 9 Computers in Primary Schools

No. 10 An Evaluation of Work Experience Programmes Operating in Government Secondary Schools in Western Australia

No. 11 Girls, Boys and Subject Choice

ISBN 0 7244 8489 2
ISSN 0156-1863

PREFACE

During August 1981, in my capacity as Chairman of the Commonwealth School Commission's National Advisory Committee on Gifted and Talented Children, I attended the Fourth World Congress on Gifted and Talented Children in Montreal. There, I delivered a paper which reviewed recent developments in Australia and discussed emerging issues confronting school systems. Copies are being issued by the Commission in its occasional paper series and will serve as background reading for a national seminar being convened by the Commission in November, 1981.

My purpose in issuing the paper to Departmental schools is to encourage professional debate on a topic of major importance. The paper should be considered in conjunction with Policy Paper No. 31, which was issued earlier this year. Readers, particularly secondary school teachers, might also relate the thesis in the paper to the report of the Priest Committee which calls for schools and their authorities to "fit school programmes to students rather than students to programmes". In this paper I have argued that it is by implementing such general reforms, affecting the whole school population, that durable improvements will emerge for gifted and talented youngsters.

I would like to thank Mr Angus, Assistant Director (Research) and staff of the Research Branch for their assistance in the preparation of the paper.

LEGITIMIZING PROVISION FOR GIFTED CHILDREN: AN AUSTRALIAN PERSPECTIVE

This paper sets out to review past achievements and consider future developments associated with provision for gifted children in Australia. While recognizing that children with outstanding artistic and creative talents are sometimes described by the umbrella term 'gifted', the paper addresses itself mainly to the intellectually most able children in schools. The discussion that follows presents a system-level perspective - that is, it is concerned principally with questions and issues as they relate to the formulation of policy by State education authorities charged with administering the large centralized school systems.

In examining developments which have occurred over the past two decades, the paper will demonstrate that the responses of school authorities towards special provision for gifted children have already moved through two stages, the first being one of relative complacency, and the second a period of rather active experimentation. Currently, Australia may be on the brink of a critical third phase, during which the rather fragmented and disparate efforts of the previous few years must be consolidated in such a way that schools and systems accept responsibility for gifted children as a mainstream concern. The paper presents the contention that, unless this happens, the recent efforts are likely to be overtaken and swept aside by new priorities. To consolidate the gains, provision for gifted children must become part of a general re-organization which enables the neighbourhood school to cater more effectively for the needs of all its pupils, including those possessing high intellectual potential.

The period under review can thus be regarded as falling into three relatively distinct phases. The first, from 1960 to 1975, was one of only modest and disjointed interest in gifted children. The second phase, from about 1976 until 1980, saw considerable experimentation in providing for gifted children. The crucial third phase may be just beginning.

SCHOOLING IN AUSTRALIA

Constitutionally, education in Australia is a responsibility of the State governments. Each of the six States and two Territories exercises this responsibility through a centrally organized education department located in the capital city. These departments develop and administer the major policies applicable to government schools. The large majority of Australian school children attend government schools.+

The Federal (or Commonwealth) Government, notwithstanding its limited role as defined by the Constitution, has in recent years exerted a powerful influence in Australian education through its financial support of general and special purpose programmes. The major Federal influence on primary and secondary education has been the Commonwealth Schools Commission. The Schools Commission is a statutory authority which advises the Commonwealth Minister for Education on the needs of schools, and recommends grants to the States to assist with capital and recurrent expenditure in both government and non-government schools.

Non-government schools cater for approximately 22 per cent of primary and secondary enrolments. The Catholic education systems in each State administer a significant number of schools, and represent a large proportion of the private-school sector. Non-government schools in Australia receive a measure of support both from State governments and from the Federal Government, with the level of Federal support in particular rising in recent years.

More than 90 per cent of the recurrent costs and 70 per cent of the capital costs of providing primary and secondary education in government schools are met through funds allocated in State budgets. The remainder consists of general and-specific-purpose grants to the States from the Federal Government. There is no tradition of financing education through

---

+ A brief statistical summary of Australian schools is provided in the appendix.

local taxation, as there is in North America and, to a lesser extent, in European countries such as the United Kingdom. The direct local funding of schools may explain the limited involvement in education of local-government bodies and other local groups.

Visitors to Australia are sometimes struck by the similarities between the various State-school systems. Standards of buildings, class sizes, per capita expenditure and so on are comparable across the nation. Secondary schooling is comprehensive and progression through the school is usually based on chronological promotion whereby children proceed in a lockstep fashion one grade per year - a significant feature of Australian school systems as far as gifted children are concerned. Despite their many common features however, it should be noted that there are important differences between the State systems. For example, States differ in the extent to which central education authorities prescribe the curriculum of schools. Some State systems produce detailed syllabuses (and even texts) which schools are encouraged to use, whereas other State systems encourage a large measure of school autonomy on curriculum questions.

Given the independence of the State education systems and their important yet subtle differences, it is not surprising that State responses to concerns for gifted children have been uneven.

1960-1975: A PHASE OF LIMITED INTEREST

The dominant reform of the 1960s was the Australia-wide change to comprehensive schooling founded upon the view that structures which facilitate streaming and selective entry are educationally and socially unsound. In most States, by the beginning of the decade, the system of selective, single-sex, secondary schooling had been dismantled. In its place, coinciding with a substantial expansion of numbers and improvements in retention rates, there developed patterns of secondary education based on the neighbourhood high school - patterns that are largely intact today. The student intake of most schools represented the whole ability range and contained a cross-section of society.

Throughout this period entry requirements of universities continued to exert a dominating influence upon the curriculum of Australian secondary schools. In most States students sat for university entrance examinations which not only influenced what was taught but also served as benchmarks against which the scholarship of particular schools could be assessed. The impact of university examinations was strengthened during the 1960s, when universities began to impose entry quotas on particular faculties within their institutions, thereby increasing the competition for places. Some present-day critics of Australian secondary schools are of the view that this influence continues to pervade schools and that, as a consequence, the curriculum is unduly academic in flavour. They believe that exceptionally able students are well enough catered for by the academic emphasis in comprehensive secondary schools, which, in their view, are oriented towards those students who are university bound.

During the 1960s and early 1970s 'gifted' was not a term much in vogue. Nor was the notion that special provision should be made available for children with outstanding intellectual potential as determined by psychological tests. The major educational thrusts were in other areas and had other sub-populations in mind. However, a few remnants of earlier programmes for gifted children from pre-Second-World-War days survived. For example, in New South Wales, so-called Opportunity 'C' classes for able Years 5 and 6 students continued in a number of primary schools and still operate today. Also, in some States, a few government selective-entry secondary schools resisted the national surge towards comprehensive secondary schooling, and a small number of these still operate today. They resemble the more prestigious Australian non-government schools in their adherence to the British grammar-school tradition. Probably the only major new development concerning gifted children was the establishment of classes within comprehensive secondary schools in several States for students who exhibited outstanding talents in the arts (such as music, dance and art) and in foreign languages.

A notable development which took place during the period under review was the formation of the Commonwealth Schools Commission in 1973. Following its establishment, the Commission gave a high priority to ameliorating the effects of socio-economic disadvantage. The influential report of the Interim Committee of the Schools Commission, Schools in Australia,[1] regarded 'equality' as a principle of major importance. The report called upon schools to

> ... compensate to some extent through schooling for unequal out-of-school situations in order to ensure that the child's overall condition of upbringing is as free of restriction due to the circumstances of his family as public action through the schools can make it.(p.11),

and

> to make special efforts to assist those whose pace of learning is slow. (p.11)

The report further commented:

> ... past educational expenditure has been weighted in favour of those who learn most easily and who therefore persist at school longer; and the Committee judges that some altering of the balance of expenditure in favour of earlier stages of education to consolidate a more equal basic achievement between children is desirable. (p.11)

The values expressed in these statements were embodied in the Schools Commission disadvantaged schools and innovations funding programmes and were regarded by many as ideologically running counter to the view that special provision should be made available for gifted children. However, notwithstanding the viewpoint, education systems began to question the appropriateness of their provisions for gifted students.

THE SECOND PHASE: EXPERIMENTATION DURING 1976-80

No single dramatic event or decision was responsible for the widespread and sustained interest in gifted children that was recognizable during the late 1970s. Yet, State by State, school authorities announced inquiries, structures, and programmes on behalf of gifted and talented children.[2] The period has been characterized by experimentation and eclecticism; and while it is not the purpose of this paper to describe in detail what has been tried in the various States, the following examples are illustrative of the situation which emerged.+

- In most States, associations for gifted and talented children, with a membership predominantly of parents, were formed and began the process of cultivating political support.

- Several systems designated gifted education co-ordinators or task-force leaders with support structures of varying sizes to engage in programme development and provide consultancy services to parents, teachers and schools. The New South Wales Education Department for example, appointed a special consultant to each of its eleven administrative regions.

- Enrichment schemes of various kinds were established in most States. These typically have offered camps; part-time withdrawal to special-interest centres established for gifted children; and programmes involving artists in residence, visiting scientists, writers and prominent members of the professions and the public.

+ A more detailed account of recent developments in the various States and Territories is contained in a Schools Commission discussion paper.[3]

- While chronological promotion, as mentioned earlier, has generally applied in most school systems, some systems began considering ways of accelerating students through school courses. The Victorian Education Department, for example, moved ahead with plans to allow a select group of academically able students to concertina six years of secondary education into four. The policy adopted was to revise the curriculum so that, where appropriate, students could proceed at a faster pace and grapple sooner with more advanced concepts. Such students could obtain advanced credit or early admission to tertiary institutions. Other States began investigating similar possibilities. In Tasmania, for example, the establishment of senior secondary colleges for Years 11 and 12 students has enabled academically able students to proceed more quickly towards university entrance levels of work.

- States differed in the extent to which services for gifted children were centralized. The South Australian Education Department took the stance that provision for gifted children should be seen in the first place as the responsibility of the neighbourhood school, supported by specialists and community members. The Queensland Education Department later enunciated a similar policy. Many non-government schools also shared this position and pursued a policy of providing individual development for each child within the normal school programme. On the other hand, the Western Australian Education Department instituted a range of programmes for primary and secondary schools, including a State-wide system whereby through a variety of screening procedures intellectually gifted students are offered places in specially devised programmes in selected comprehensive secondary schools.

It should be apparent from the above illustrations that, across Australia, systems and schools have put into practice an array of programmes and schemes for gifted children. What has been learned from this large-scale 'experimentation'?

A number of key issues have emerged which require resolution - for example, the preference of most educators would be for a system wherein the local primary or secondary school became the essential unit in the provision for gifted. The question which must therefore be asked and explored is how far this objective is being attained in those schools and States where it is being advocated as major policy. A related issue is whether other procedures that involve forms of segregation, which many teachers would avoid if possible, may nevertheless be a necessary transitional approach before the neighbourhood school can assume the additional role of provider for the needs of the intellectually gifted child.

Although it may be unrealistic to expect early agreement on the merits of the different approaches, it is disturbing to observe the lack of any mechanism to review programmes and pool understandings. So far, experimentation has occurred with only rudimentary notions of evaluation in mind. It is significant that this picture is changing, and education authorities are beginning to look towards evaluating their programmes. The recognition of the need for evaluation may well be a pointer to the fact that systems are ready to enter a critical new phase.

PHASE THREE: CONSOLIDATING AND LEGITIMIZING CHANGE

It must soon be necessary to decide whether the 'experimental' phase of provision should continue, or whether it is time for consolidation. If system authorities are to avoid the criticism of tokenism, and if they are to protect their current 'investment' from budgetary cuts and consequent dismantling, then provision for gifted children must be accepted as a routine activity. <u>How to build provision into the mainstream of educational practice is the critical question at present confronting educators of the gifted in Australia</u>.

The political and economic context

The 1970s were a decade given to educational reform fuelled by massive increases in Federal funding. The picture is now changing. The present tightening of educational expenditure is ill-timed as far as the proponents of special provision for gifted children are concerned. It would seem that they have missed their chance. Important Federal educational instrumentalities have either disappeared or are threatened as a result of a cost-cutting exercise which occurred during May, 1981. The Education Research and Development Committee, a national committee charged with co-ordinating and funding research, was terminated abruptly. The Curriculum Development Centre, a statutory body established to work in liaison with States on curriculum development assignments of national priority, also appears headed for abolition. In June, 1981, the Commonwealth Government announced new guide-lines to control Federal funding, which in effect will mean less Federal money available for expenditure on priorities identified at the State level.

New initiatives proposed by the Schools Commission in its Triennial Report[4] were rejected by the Federal Government. Hence a proposal that a special purpose programme for gifted children be supported for the 1982-84 triennium was not accepted. However, one bright light in the guide-lines was the special mention of gifted children in the context of a programme of projects of national significance. Modest funding has been set aside to enable the Schools Commission to stimulate and support development in 1982 and can be expected to continue for some years at least.[5] The Commission's national advisory committee on gifted children has a critical role to play in overviewing activity at a national level, and ensuring that gifted children remain a key item on the Commission's agenda.

Even though funding is likely to be tight for the remainder of the decade, it seems reasonable to expect public support for the ear-marking of resources for gifted children. Change during the 1970s was encouraged by a moral imperative that education had a central role to play in righting social wrongs. As other Western countries have already found, society is a leviathan not easily stirred by the proddings of educational forces. The public (and governments) are today much less sanguine about such matters. The rhetoric of the 1980s has a new ring to do with 'quality', 'individual excellence', and the 'dignity of work'. While there may be reactionary overtones to such an ideology, it will draw support from many thoughtful members of the public.

The change of ideology may well work to the advantage of gifted children, as may also, paradoxically, the tightening of educational funding. Tertiary institutions, which might be expected to have a vested interest in gifted children, have been slow to respond to school initiatives in the area. They have tended to assume that tertiary admittance examinations net most of the gifted children and that their courses extend these students once they have embarked on them. The financial constraints presently affecting schools are being felt at least as severely by the tertiary sector, where there is now a growing interest in securing a share of the gifted children 'market' in one form or another. Courses for teachers of the gifted have recently been offered in many of the universities and colleges of advanced education. Furthermore, as has already been mentioned, some universities have either commenced, or are in the process of considering, advanced placement or early admission of students in certain subject areas and are taking steps to improve their liaison with schools.

Legitimation: meeting the conditions

In effect, if the activity of the last five years is to amount to more than an epiphenomenon, then provision for gifted children must be legitimized within school systems - that is, the provision must be recognized as no longer special; it must become a routine measure within an established part of the system. Legitimation could recognizably have occurred when the following conditions applied:

1. The conceptual and theoretical bases of the provision is expressed in such a way as to allow informed debate and consistent planning.

2. The identification (and possible misclassification) of gifted children ceases to be an issue of major contention.

3. Implementation occurs through all levels of schooling.

4. The continuation of provision at system and school level does not depend upon either voluntarism or evangelism.

5. The continuation of provision is not conditional upon the activities of militant pressure groups, either within or without the system.

6. Open evaluation of provision is accepted as a routine part of practice.

7. Funds are routinely allocated rather than directed through special purpose grants.

The movement of systems towards a form of provision to which these characteristics or conditions can apply will not be a straightforward task. Many important issues must first be resolved.

Consider, for example, the first condition relating to the rationale underlying the recent initiatives. There is no doubt that the conceptual bases of the reforms need much more elaboration and airing. A feature of programmes for gifted students in many States is the dominance of the concept of intellectual ability and the use of IQ tests. Many of the programmes are dependent upon IQ testing and their theoretical underpinnings are derived from notions of intelligence more than half a century old. The longevity (and pervasiveness) of these ideas is symptomatic of the general state of knowledge about gifted children. The area calls for breakthroughs or radical recastings, but so far these have not been forthcoming. In the current upsurge of activity, few new insights have been derived from recent research. Unfortunately, the academic world in Australia appears to have, in the main, shunned both the theoretical and practical issues associated with gifted students. This may explain why the professional debate about gifted children has to date been rather dull and limited. It may also explain why the academic leadership for current developments concerning gifted children has largely been provided by overseas experts invited by Australian education authorities.+ Before provision for gifted children can be fully legitimized the philosophical and theoretical foundations of the provision need much wider and more detailed debate by both the academic and practitioner members of the education profession.

+ Among the more prominent visitors were Professor Miriam Goldberg (Columbia University); Professor Julian Stanley (Johns Hopkins University); Dr Eric Ogilvie (Nene College, Northampton U.K.); and Mr Henry Collis (World Council for Gifted Children).

The second condition, concerning identification, is highly pertinent in Australia at the present time. Identification will cease to be an issue only when the distinction between 'gifted' and 'nearly gifted' students does not lead to the assignment of pupils to radically different programmes. Present practices in some systems allow students identified by quite fallible measures to be given school and out-of-school experiences qualitatively different from peers who score fractionally lower on the selection instruments. Such distinctions are exacerbated by approaches which define 'gifted' children to be ipso facto the highest-scoring two per cent (or some small arbitrarily decided percentage) of the test-takers. The strongest justification of this approach is that it constitutes a short-term expediency - that is, such a measure may be justified as an interim step towards assisting the most able. In the longer term, however, it must be assumed that the beneficial effects of such assistance will be extended to other able students by the deliberate expansion of provision, or by the percolation of ideas and practices through the system.

With regard to the third condition - the spread of activity through all levels of schooling - most activity at present in Australia is occurring in the middle- and upper-primary levels. There seems to be less interest in the early childhood area. In some States there is not much penetration into the secondary sector and the extent of provision seems to be limited to a small number of pilot or 'showcase' schools, which operate with little impact on the mainstream. Furthermore, until the problems of articulation between levels of schooling (namely pre-primary, primary, secondary and post-secondary), between institutions, and between courses and year-levels within institutions are eased, the potential effectiveness of the provision is unlikely to be realized.

A special challenge for a country such as Australia is to guarantee an adequate provision, irrespective of the geographic location of students. The current wave of interest in distance education and astonishing developments in communications technology provide an optimistic portent for isolated students pursuing correspondence lessons.

The fourth condition or characteristic concerns the extensiveness of support among teachers for special action on behalf of gifted children. There is far from complete acceptance by the teaching profession that gifted children deserve the prominent efforts that are being made on their behalf. Aborigines, migrants, the poor, and the handicapped are sub-populations which command a broader basis of support. Gifted programmes smack of elitism to many teachers and appear to challenge the value of egalitarianism, which, at least in name, is nationally extolled. This is not a uniquely Australian phenomenon, as Goldberg discusses in her comparative study of gifted and talented education in Australia and the United States.[6]

It is not clear how much of the backing that has so far been given by teachers is due to the novelty of the programmes. The continuing and enthusiastic involvement of teachers is essential; however, it is salutory to observe that one of the fundamental lessons to emerge from studies of educational reform in Western countries during the past few decades is that change which demands more teacher time and greater effort is usually short-lived.[7] In particular, change which is contingent upon voluntary contribution from teachers is likely to peter out. There is already clear evidence that programmes for the gifted within Australia have placed considerable demands upon teachers. The North American literature has adopted the term, 'teacher burnout' to describe the constant stress and subsequent exhaustion felt by numbers of highly dedicated, hard-working teachers.[8] Teachers of gifted children seem particularly vulnerable to this syndrome. Resolving these problems must assume a high priority in a system.

The three remaining conditions for legitimizing provision for gifted children relate to pressure groups, evaluation, and funding. The role played by pressure groups in Australia in exciting interest in gifted children, and its likely effect can be overstated. Although it may be that the fledgling gifted and talented children's associations have yet to realize their full capabilities, it would be incorrect to represent the

current system initiatives as simple the direct outcome of effective parental or community lobbying. On the question of 'open evaluation', the absence of any formal evaluation strategies reflects the 'bootstrap' growth of activity rather than an attempt to deliberately conceal planning initiaitves. Evaluation appears to be gaining a foothold in educational practice in Australia and proposals for some substantial initiatives are not coming forward.[9] Finally, on the question of funding it should be noted that as long as the provision depends upon specially earmarked funds it is susceptible to changes in the climate of public (government) funding and budget pruning. There is a dilemma here, of course. To integrate funding across various other budget items is to risk the possiblility of loss of control over spending. There is need for general acceptance of the view that gifted children require specific educational provision such as is normally afforded to other sections of the student population.

A strategy for change

The critical question facing education authorities is how to embed provision for gifted children into school and system structures, for it is becoming clear that the present spate of activity may not survive for long if it remains an 'add on'. Can provision be accommodated within existing school and system structures? One way would be to revert to a pattern of streaming according to ability. Schools could probably make better provision for the exceptionally able if they formed a special class in each school. This would require little re-timetabling or effort on the part of schools. However, such a strategy would revive a great deal of opposition concerning elitism and social justice, and would overall be regarded as educationally and socially regressive.

The long-term success of current efforts for gifted children is more likely contingent upon broadly based educational reforms which have the interests of a large body of students in mind. Certainly, it is not reasonable to expect schools to bear the brunt of major re-organization for

the benefit of only a small percentage of its student population, particularly if there were any possibility that such steps could be regarded as having a deleterious effect on the large majority. The most decisive thrust would be to effect organizational changes which provided more flexible entry and exit points (at pre-school, primary, and secondary levels) and enable students to progress at different rates through the school. The rationale for such reforms is that chronological admission and progression, which are implicit in most school organizational patterns, assume a demonstrably conservative range of ability. As a consequence there is a tendency for the less able to be unduly taxed while the more able are held back in the interests of the majority of students.

Recent developments in Australia offer some encouragement. There has been a movement at the early childhood level in several States towards recognizing the different rates at which children develop. This has been reflected in the adoption of admission policies which allow continuous entry to Year 1 and which permit children to spend varying lengths of time in reception classes. In addition, vertical (or family) grouping whereby children from several grades form an instructional unit is being adopted in numbers of schools. At the other end of the spectrum the current spotlight on transition from school to work has drawn attention to shortcomings in school leaving policies. Work experience programmes, link courses for students attending schools and technical institutions, and the admission of adult learners to high-school class-rooms are all instances of the blurring of the interface between school and working life. Such reforms would receive broad backing from many educators who, in fact, have the <u>less</u> able highest on their agenda of concern. What such reforms share is a respect for the educational requirements of atypical learners who are ill-suited by arrangements designed for the hypothetical 'average' student. Any initiative which conjoins the interests of the most able and the less able multiplies its chances of success by a significant factor. Furthermore, it provides more obvious grounds for the dismissal of allegations that system efforts for gifted children are motivated by elitist values.

There is at present something of a ground-swell for the reform of Australian secondary education. The rigidity of school structures and organizational patterns at the secondary school level has been the subject of considerable criticism. In a recent report, Schooling for 15 and 16 Year-Olds,[10] the Schools Commission, while generally silent about gifted students, is firm in its criticism of the organizational barriers that inhibit educational reforms in schools. The traditional patterns of teacher specialization, timetables, period allocations and subject orientation are cited as factors which outweigh considerations of student development. Efforts to relax rigid school structures should be strongly supported, more so because gifted children will not be the only beneficiaries from a general freeing-up of these constraints. Computer-assisted learning, the self-instructional techniques of distance education, library centres, commercially produced and system-produced curriculum materials structured to cope with different rates of learning - these are some of the means available to assist schools to overcome these barriers and assist students become more effective self-learners. The centrally administered system is well placed to stimulate and assist the adoption of procedures of this type.

What is being suggested here is not a radical upheaval of secondary education but rather the application of constant pressure and support for change to achieve multiple objectives, some of which are of special importance to gifted children. In other words, proponents for special provision for gifted children must join forces with the advocates of the disadvantaged, the less able, and other sub-populations of students. That such alliances are possible has been demonstrated in the Western Australian programme for gifted children, which has an accent on the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged students who are highly able. The Priority Exceptional Students Study (PrESS) is an R & D project which is developing special identification procedures and programmes for such children.[11] The study has shown that the coalition between disadvantaged and gifted does not necessarily require ideological compromise. Nor does it threaten the essence of comprehensive schooling.

The strategy for change, however, does have its own built-in tension. On the one hand, gifted children are special and must continue to be regarded so; on the other hand, in the long term the most successful means of providing for them is likely to emerge from a general reform of the education system designed to benefit all students. In such a reform, what is essential for gifted children can easily be lost from sight. To see such a strategy through to a successful end will require vigilant and sympathetic leadership from system authorities. It will take time and persistent effort.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FEDERAL AND STATE EDUCATION POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

Can there be such a thing as a national policy on gifted children for Australia? Only in the broadest sense. Given the state of theory and the diversity of current practice, it is unlikely that any Federal agency will want to enshrine a single approach in a policy statement and set about its implementation: nor is this desirable. In any case, States are unlikely to abandon precipitately current plans and practices. However, it is quite possible that there could be some convergence by systems upon selected approaches from among the many introduced in recent years. This would occur as a matter of course under normal circumstances. The question arises, however, whether systems can benefit from a more formal process of review. The prospects for such action have been weakened by the demise of the national curriculum and research bodies and there is the danger that the lessons that can be derived from the experiences of the States will not be pulled together effectively. Furthermore, issues that arise during the analysis of current programmes will not be as readily the subject of investigation. It is important, therefore, that the Schools Commission and State authorities build into their budgets a research and evaluation

component for gifted children. A priority for the future must be to develop an evaluation strategy that will provide information helpful for future decisions. Some of the broadly based evaluation approaches developed over recent years would seem to offer useful opportunities. Comparative studies of the effectiveness of educational provision for other sub-populations should also prove illuminating.

There will always be a tension between adopting a gradualist approach to change and seizing the moment. In addition, there will be the tension between exerting pressure from the top down and facilitating grass-roots pressure for change. So far, the demand for special provision for gifted children has come from parents and from education authorities; the present national interest cannot be fairly represented as an outcome of school-level initiatives.

This raises the issue of the extent to which current resources should be allocated for change initiated at the school level. Some States have clearly taken the view that it is for individual schools to decide whether or not to take up the challenge. The view adopted in this paper has been that unless central authorities take the lead and provide the necessary momentum then the school-level efforts may soon be dissipated; invocations for change by central authorities that are not followed-up with action and support amount to very little. Past experiences reinforce this point of view. Critical structural change, such as the adoption of comprehensive schooling, depends largely upon system initiatives. Thus, until supportive structures are established then individual efforts of schools will probably be short lived. This view should be considered by education authorities when allocating funds for gifted children. With limited resources, the highest priority should not be given to lighting more brush-fires by stimulating innovative practices for gifted children at school level; the diversity of approaches is already there. Instead, the major effort should now be marshalled by central authorities to attack the key priority areas, particularly those which are likely to reduce the rigid organizational barriers that apply in many schools.

As long as gifted children are defined as a very small percentage of any age cohort, they cannot expect to occupy the system's highest priority for any extended period of time. Hence, the challenge of the 1980s is to see that system and school responses to gifted children shift from specially funded and staffed extras to become a matter of mainstream concern. The strategy that should be adopted is for educational authorities to consider their efforts on behalf of gifted children as part of a broader basis of reform. This is the best means of consolidating recent gains and of building a bridgehead for enduring and worth-while change. To achieve this end some national lead and stimulus is needed. With the demise of other Federal curriculum and research agencies, the Schools Commission is uniquely placed to undertake itself or sponsor evaluation, research and curriculum development exercises in conjunction with the States.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Karmel, P. (Chairman), Schools in Australia: Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission. Canberra, AGPS, 1973.

2. The following system reports and activities occurring during the latter half of the 1970s illustrate the widespread activity in Australia during that period.

   A committee was appointed by the New South Wales Minister for Education to enquire into the education of the talented child and published its report in 1977. (The Education of the Talented Child, Report of the Committee appointed by the Minister for Education to enquire into the Education of the Talented Child, Sydney, New South Wales Department of Education, 1977).

   The Victorian Education Department established the Gifted Children's Task Force in 1977 to provide a consultancy service to teachers and schools.

   In Queensland the needs of gifted children received special consideration in the final report of an important parliamentary committee (Final Report: Select Committee on Education in Queensland. Queensland Government Printer, Queensland, 1980).

   In South Australia, the Adaptive Education Project was launched in 1976. Its purpose was to assist schools to adapt curriculum content, teaching methods, and school organization to suit all pupils (specifically including gifted children).

The Western Australian Education Department published an initial policy paper in 1978 following the examination by a special committee of the needs of gifted children (Gifted and Talented Children in Western Australian Schools. Policy from the Director-General's Office, No. 15, Perth, Education Department of Western Australia, 1978).

In 1977, the report, Secondary Education in Tasmania, drew attention to the needs of gifted children in that State (Secondary Education in Tasmania. Hobart, Tasmanian Government Printer, 1977.)

In the Northern Territory an advisory service for gifted children was introduced as a result of policy decisions in 1976. In the Australian Capital Territory special programmes for gifted children began operating in 1979.

3. Schools Commission. The Education of Gifted Students: A Discussion Paper. Canberra, AGPS, 1980.

4. Schools Commission. Report for the Triennium 1982-84. Canberra, AGPS, 1981.

5. Schools Commission. Report for 1982. Canberra, AGPS, 1981.

6. Professor Goldberg (Teachers College, Columbia University) first visited Australia in 1978 and reviewed developments in gifted education. She was invited to return on two further occasions - in 1980 and 1981. Her analysis of issues, based upon her first two visits is found in Goldberg, M.L. Issues in Gifted/Talented Education in the United States and Australian Contexts. 1980. In publication.

7. Tyack, D.G., Kirst, M.W., and Hansot, E. Educational Reforms: Retrospect and Prospect. Teachers College Record, 1980, 81(3), 252-269.

8. One of the earliest investigations of 'burnout' is found in: Maslach, C. and Pines, A. The Burnout Syndrome in a Day Care Setting. Child Care Quarterly, 1977, 6, 100-113. The December, 1979, issue (6(4)) of Phi Delta Kappan also contained several articles dealing with the topic.

9. The Education Department of Western Australia engaged Mr S.S. Dunn, former Chairman of the Education Research and Development Committee, and former Dean of the Faculty of Education at Monash University, to undertake an external review of selection procedures. The publication is Dunn, S.S., Identification and Selection of Year 7 Pupils for the Intellectually Talented Program in Selected Western Australian Education Department Secondary Schools. Education Department of Western Australia. (Mimeographed). 1981.

10. Schools Commission. Schooling for 15 and 16 Year Olds. Canberra, AGPS, 1980.

11. The first report of this study is: Deschamp, P., Robson, G., Nash, C. Identifying High Ability Disadvantaged Students: A First Report of the Priority Exceptional Students Study. Perth, Education Department of Western Australia, 1981.

APPENDIX

Statistical background

In 1980 over 34 cer pent of Australia's 14.6 million population were under 20 years of age. Although the population is continuing to expand the proportion of young people is declining. In 1972, 37.3 per cent of the population were under 20 years of age but by 1986 this proportion is expected to fall to 32.2 per cent.

This overall decline in the young population has been reflected in school enrolments, which peaked at 2.993 million in 1978, was 2.985 million in 1980, and is projected to be as low as 2.809 million by the end of the decade, a decline of nearly 6 per cent.

Each of Australia's six State governments operate a government school system. In addition the Northern Territory (a Commonwealth Territory but with State-like autonomy) and the Federal Government in the Australian Capital Territory operate similar systems. Government schools enrolled 2 318 million students in 1980. The remaining 22.3 per cent of school students were in non-government schools. In contrast to the overall decline in school enrolments since 1978, non-government school enrolments have continued to increase steadily. While there are considerable variations in the pattern of enrolment changes from State to State, it appears that for Australia as a whole the proportion of students attending non-government schools will continue to increase, particularly in the late primary and junior secondary years.

In each State and Territory children are required to attend school from their sixth birthday. Most children begin their formal schooling earlier. In some systems children may enrol prior to their fifth birthday. Primary schooling extends for 6 or 7 years according to the particular State or Territory system, with junior secondary schooling being provided for a further three or four years followed by a senior secondary period of two years leading to matriculation (Year 12). In Tasmania matriculation may be obtained after one senior secondary year (Year 11) and in Victorian secondary schools, technical courses also lead to a certificate obtained in Year 11.

Over 90 per cent of students entering secondary education proceed to Year 10, 88.5 per cent in government schools and 97.1 per cent in non-government schools. While 54 per cent of entrants reach Year 11, only 34.5 per cent enter Year 12. Retention rates for females to Year 12 are currently 37.3 per cent compared with 31.9 per cent for males. Retention rates to Year 12 for all students in government schools are 28.4 per cent compared with 56.1 per cent in non-government schools. These rates are, however, significantly affected by the movement of students, particularly males, to technical education courses, which in Victoria are considered as part of the secondary system only as far as Year 11 and in other States are entirely separate from general secondary courses.

In 1979 there were more than 175 000 teachers in Australian schools, over 34 per cent more than there were only seven years previously. In that period student-teacher ratios were reduced from 25.6 to 20.3 in government primary schools, from 16.2 to 12.3 in government secondary schools, from 28.5 to 23.1 in non-government primary schools and from 18.8 to 15.6 in non-government secondary schools. Overall student staffing ratios (including teachers, executive, professional and non-professional supporting staff, and clerical, administrative and maintenance staff) ranged from 14.2 to 8.1 in government schools and averaged 20.2 in non-government primary schools and 12.2 in non-government secondary schools in 1979.

Finance

Australia devoted 6.1 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product to education in 1978-79 with school-level outlays representing over 9 per cent of total government outlays on all functions. Of the more than $4 500 million expended by public authorities on schools in Australia in 1979-80, 89 per cent was applied to government schools with the remaining 11 per cent expended in grants to non-government schools. State authorities provide 91.3 per cent of the recurrent expenditure in their government schools from their budgets, with the remaining 8.7 per cent provided by direct grants from the Federal Government. Capital expenditure ($436 million in 1979/80) in government schools receives a much higher direct subvention from the Commonwealth amounting to approximately 30 per cent of the total. States provided about one-third of government direct grants to non-government schools with the remainder provided by the Commonwealth. Non-government schools rely on school fees, private donations and church or other institutional support for the remainder of their income. The majority of non-government school enrolments (over 78 per cent) are in Catholic schools, which charge low fees and operate at about 70 per cent of the recurrent costs of government schools. Most of the remainder of the non-government school population attend higher-fee schools which operate at or above government school cost levels.

14794/9/81—2400—O

WILLIAM C. BROWN, Government Printer, Western Australia